



The sound of pain therapy

Promising new treatment combines waves of sound, water

BY JOANNA FRKETICH

A promising new therapy Hamilton doctors are prescribing to alleviate chronic pain has patients shaking — literally.

Sound pressure waves make their whole bodies vibrate while they do low-impact exercise in a warm pool. Most patients can't even feel the sound vibrations generated by a transducer in the water, but they say it's reducing their pain and increasing their mobility.

"It's early days, but we're excited," said Dr. William Bensen, Hamilton rheumatologist and associate clinical professor at McMaster University. "Pills alone don't do it all. Pills with exercise work and this is a way at getting at that, plus the sound waves may help."

AquaSonix Therapy is also saving the therapeutic pool at St. Joseph's Healthcare on Charlton Avenue East, which had been slated to close as the hospital fought an \$8-million deficit last year. The Toronto company providing and testing the therapy is covering the \$50,000 it costs to run the pool each year, plus paying the hospital rent that will be used to fund other programs.

The new therapy started in December 2005 and treats about 25 patients a day suffering from lower back pain, arthritis and fibromyalgia, as well as people recovering from stroke, car accidents and joint replacement surgery.

The water temperature is between 94 C and 96 C to keep the muscles relaxed and the sound waves are on for about 25 minutes of the 45-minute class.

The combination of exercise, heat and sound waves is supposed to work by increasing blood circulation, inhibiting



RON ALBERTSON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Elizabeth Patterson, foreground, June Farmer, centre, and Billie Binkley work through a sound wave therapy class at St. Joseph's Healthcare. The classes are now offered to the general public.

pain signals and raising the levels of endorphins — the body's natural pain killers.

"We focus on balance, strength and flexibility," said Yvette Ferguson, a registered nurse and aquafit instructor who teaches the class. "We also focus on morale and self-esteem, which is just as important. A lot of arthritis sufferers are depressed because they feel isolated. But they feel great in the pool. They feel empowered."

The therapy doesn't come cheap. It costs \$19.50 a class for the first 15 classes. After that, it's \$50 a month. However, the company is giving newcomers three classes free and doctors point out that it's cheaper than physiotherapy which costs \$40 to \$50 a session and has long waits.

For June and Harold Farmer, the aqua therapy has been worth every penny. The Dundas

couple say they move better and have less pain since they started a month ago.

"It keeps you limber," said June, 79, who has hip problems. "You don't feel the pain. You can do almost anything in the water. I just notice a big difference. When you get to our age, if you don't use it, you lose it."

Harold, 82, said he was having trouble doing exercises in a gym to improve a nagging shoulder injury.

"I couldn't do the exercises," he said. "Here, it's more relaxing. I do everything."

The company is testing the therapy as they provide it, using a medical assessment questionnaire that is standard among researchers. Early results show a 51 per cent reduction in pain.

For more information, call AquaSonix Therapy at 1-877-622-2121.

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